Note by LMB: This e-mail interview was done in January 2010 with interviewer Maria Zannini, for the website *The Online Writing Workshop* homepage to be found at:

http://sff.onlinewritingworkshop.com/

The interview itself posted at:

http://sff.onlinewritingworkshop.com/newsletter/2010_05.shtml

Here are your interview questions.

1. Do your characters ever write themselves?

LMB: Almost all of them do, I think, bar a few spear carriers or other who just pop in long enough to deliver their portion of plot. (And even they have the potential of growing into full-blooded people later on.) But all the viewpoint characters certainly wrap their stories around themselves. I have on occasion started a tale with a plot, setting, historical event, or even a piece of technology as a seed crystal, but no story gets up and runs till the characters arrive.

Of course I still need a setting, a place for them to act, and a plot, actions for them to take (and thus develop and display yet more of their character), before words can start happening. It's the old "three-legged stool" problem; the most immediately important leg will always be the one that is missing.

My characters also have the ability to go on a sort of sit-down strike, when what I have proposed that they do next isn't right. It's rather the opposite of what people mean by "the characters ran away with the story." I've learned to recognize it (not always right away) as a creative sort of writer's block, one that keeps me from wasting time and energy writing the wrong things. For which I thank them. I think.

2. The Vorkosigan Saga seems your most popular series, in particular Miles Vorkosigan. Will you ever run out of material for him?

LMB: I don't know. His universe, certainly, being supposedly a descendant of our own, ought to contain as much material as the world we know. (Although I trust most readers realize that the gaudy space opera backdrop is bogus unobtanium, in terms of real world physics, not to mention economics–the biology's pretty solid, though, that's the actual SF part.) But my head, alas, does not hold more than one head's worth of the world. Miles has, in my mind, a finite lifespan, and only so much life can fit into it; as a character, he has other limits as well that constrain the sorts and scopes of tales I can tell with him or about him.

So: yes, but I may well run out of time myself first. Plus there are all those other possible books to fit in somewhere.

3. Is there any one book or series you've written that's become a personal favorite–and why?

LMB: I am contrarianly fond of *The Sharing Knife* tetrology, if only because it's such a genre-convention-defying… anti-epic thing. Plus, it was a story set *outdoors*. Works fall in and out of favor in my mind, depending on the winds of the year. I suspect *The Curse of Chalion* is going to stand up over time. Miles is… Miles; close to a force of nature, climbing up out of his own pages and escaping subordination to any opinion of mine.

4. You favor the outsider and underdog in your stories, choosing the worst fate imaginable and then making him cope with the fallout. Is there a message or philosophy embedded in your stories?

LMB: Nope.

Not, certainly, in the form of a conscious political agenda, a story type I loathe even when I agree with the politics. That's a mode of fiction that gets a great deal of applause from people who, I suspect, don't actually like fiction, or who are seized with a sort of neo-Calvinist uneasiness about things meant for pleasure. They seem to want fiction to justify its existence, or seek to assign it a place in their hierarchy of value, by some perceived social or political utility outside the actual private relationship of the reader with the text. Fiction as a tool to "fix" its readers, as it were, as if the readers were defective.

They are probably not picturing the same default reader as I do, when I think about the reader at all. I prefer to imagine Ms. Average Reader as a 40-year-old children's cancer hospice nurse just home from a bad day at work. She doesn't need me (or any other wittering writer) to teach her all about the human condition. She needs someone to hand her a *drink*.

(Whenever I've made the above remark at a convention panel, I always get two or three hands up at the back of the room, nurses and teachers and the like waving hello.)

Another problem with the question is that there are no books, only readings. Given the same words-in-a-row, each reader will construct a different experience in their head depending on what they bring to the text; and so, it follows, will take away different messages as well. It does make for livelier book discussions–arguing over the elephant is actually more interesting than bland universal agreement would be.

That said, every writer writes their world-view, as inescapably as breathing. But that's not a choice or an agenda, that's just a constraint.

(Be it noted, I write a lot of privileged characters as well, but generally embedded on the hidden hooks of that state. Because a story isn't just a character, it's a character plus a problem. And ideally, the shape of the character and the shape of the problem should have an optimum interlock; "let the punishment fit the crime" and all that.)

5. What's your writing process like?

LMB: I use a sort of rolling-outline technique, largely as a memory aid, and work forward a small section at a time, because that's all my brain will hold. I will start to work up ideas for a story from all sorts of sources–other reading, history, film, television, my own life experiences, debates with friends about ideas or other books. When my eyes or brain burn out on reading, I'm quite fond of all the non-fiction DVDs I can get from the local library, science and travel and history. At some point, all this will spark or clot into notions for a character or characters, their world, and the opening situation, and sometimes but not always a dim idea of the ending. This is the phase when pictures start boiling up (or shyly creeping up) in my head.

Or sometimes, I skip all that and just start with the brainburst. (Like a cloudburst. As in, "It's raining soup! Grab a bucket!") I will start jotting notes in pencil in a loose-leaf binder, my bucket of choice. By the time I have about forty or fifty pages of these, I will start to see how the story should begin.

I then make a broad section outline, up to what I call "the event horizon," which is how far I can see to write till I have to stop and make up some more. This is usually a chapter or three. I'll get a mental picture of what scenes should go in the next chapter, and push them around till they slot into sequence. I then pull out the next scene and outline it closely, almost a messy sort of first draft. I choreograph dialogue especially carefully. Then I take these notes to my computer and type up the actual scene. Lather, rinse, repeat till I get to the end of the chapter and, my brain now purged and with room to hold more, I pop back up to the next level to outline again. Every scene I write has the potential of changing what comes next, either by a character doing something unexpected or by my clearer look at the material as it's finally pinned to the page, so I re-outline constantly.

Making up the story and writing down the story are, for me, two separate activities calling for two different states of mind. Creation needs relaxation; composition is intensely focused. I do the making up part away from the computer, either while taking my walks or otherwise busying myself, or, when I get to the note-making or outlining stage, in another room. I do not compose at the computer, although I do edit on the fly, and the odd better ideas for a bit of dialogue or description do often pop out while I'm typing. Sometimes, they're sufficiently strong that they derail what I'd planned and I have to stop typing and go away and re-outline; sometimes they're just a bonus, an unexpected Good Bit, and slot right in.

I don't write a certain set number of pages or words a day. Either I'll have nothing outlined, or what I have outlined will be unsatisfactory and I'll be stalled–or doing invisible work, sometimes even invisible to me–or I'll have a fresh outline and be racing ahead to get it onto the page. I generally write a chapter in a few days, then go fallow for several days–or, in a sticky bit or when interrupted by travel, several weeks–then have another burst. I figure an average of two chapters a month for minimum professional production, more if I can get them, but even that is irregular.

I do most of my writing either in the late morning, or the late evening. Late afternoon tends to be a physiological down-time for me.

When the pictures come right, the sluice-gates open and words flow to describe them. I understand there are writers who don't think visually, who have profoundly different processes that actually involve *hearing* the words (not just the characters' speech, but the whole text) in their heads, in place of pictures, something I have trouble imagining. And there are other writing kinesthesias stranger still.

6. Is there anything you would have done differently in order to get published earlier or more easily?

LMB: I would hesitate to change anything, in retrospect, for fear of altering the ultimate outcome. I'm not even sure if "starting writing and submitting years sooner" would answer, as I think I needed to get those few more years and experiences on me before I had anything original to write.

7. What was your first big writing break and how did it come about?

LMB: My first impulse was to answer this with a description of my first short story sale (to the old *Twilight Zone Magazine* back in late 1984). But really, I'd never have made it that far without first having fallen in with my writing-support-group-by-mail. When I wrote my first "practice" novelette at the end of 1982, I sent it off to old friend Lillian Stewart Carl, with whom I'd used to write back in high school. She in turn sent it off to Patricia C. Wrede, whom Lillian had met at a con, who wrote me back a wonderful letter of critique. The three of us, who were all working on novels, then started shipping chapters back and forth–carbon copies for me, back then–bootstrapping ourselves upward. (Well, Lillian and Pat bootstrapped. I hung onto their heels and was lifted.) It was they (and a few more local friends) who kept me sane and working from the end of '82, through the first short story sale at the end of '84, all the way to the three completed novels that sold to Baen Books in October of 1985.

"Chance favors the prepared mind," again. Plus a liberal helping of "I get by with a little [actually a lot of] help from my friends."

8. Has anyone given you any writing advice that you've happily ignored?

LMB: I've received a lot of writing advice that I've unhappily ignored. Possibly as a result of being the youngest in my family by several years, I've always had this dim inner conviction that everyone around me somehow magically knows more than I do. Even now, after wandering around the internet for some time, it's always a little shock when I figure out that this isn't necessarily the case. (Being raised by w/o/l/v/e/s a terminally honest safety engineer didn't help me to develop working BS detectors, either. Surely they wouldn't say it if it wasn't true...?)

I can spot in retrospect a lot of advice that I'm now glad I ignored. For example, back when I was still unpublished, I ran the manuscript-in-progress of *The Warrior's Apprentice* past a workshop writing instructor, a published writer, who suggested I cut the whole front end, especially including the character, death, and funeral of Piotr, and start when Miles arrives at Beta Colony and acquires his first ship, because, in his mind, that was where the "real" story started, the standard guy space opera adventure that he evidently thought this was trying to be. I actually tried re-writing the beginning to cut about fifty pages according to his recommendations, looked at it for a while, and then put it all back. Another valued and trusted test reader didn't like the way I did the death of Bothari (or Bothari either, for that matter), and I tried a major re-write of that sequence as well. (This was prior to the invention, or at least my acquisition, of word processors, note, so revisions were a serious undertaking.) Stewed for a while, threw it away. It would have made a dog's breakfast of both the character and the book. After that I started to trust myself a little more.

It's a very hard balance to strike, especially when you're just starting out, to ignore the bad advice and take the good, because at that stage they are so hard for the newbie to tell apart. Especially if the bad advice comes from a perceived authority, or from a person who, confusingly, also hands out a lot of good advice. Nowadays it's easier for me. If a change lies right down flat in the manuscript and happily blends in, so that I even forget where the suggestion came from, it's OK. If it sticks up like a nail head and jabs me in the eye every time I reread it, it probably should be restored to the original, or changed to something else. If it makes me slightly sick to my stomach, it really should go, but I pretty much avoid getting that far, now.

9. What would you like to write that you haven't written yet?

LMB: Interesting question. In fact, I *can* write anything I want (within the limits of my abilities)–I just can't write *everything* I want. Or, certainly, the vast spawn of fractal sequels that the fans, bless them for caring, seem to want from me.

In some years, there has seemed to be some personal theme that was important to me just then, and the book (seen in retrospect) was my way of coming to grips with it, a baroque way of discovering what I think. (Some years, I just needed to pay my bills, or there would have been no books at all.)

When my backbrain, what a poster on the old rec.arts.sf.composition used to call "the fabulator," decides what it wants to write, it will start sending up pictures, all in bits and pieces, on the mental dumbwaiter. Floods of pictures, when it's really insistent. (It's the front brain's job to put all these frothing materials into narrative order, in a structure that will actually stand up.) And the backbrain will mulishly decline to send up anything, regardless of any external blandishments, if it doesn't want to write whatever has been proposed. Blank screen. No bricks, no mortar, no sticks, no straw, not even a huff or a puff, nothing to work with. That's how I know when it's a book and when it's not. (That's also how I know if it's the next scene, or not, come to think.)

There's a lyric from an old Tom Petty song that's always stuck in my head: "So I started out/ for I don't know where/ guess I'll know/ when I get there."

Or, I will find out what I want to write when I start writing it.

10. What advice can you give to new writers (specifically those who write SF/F)?

LMB: I am seriously out of touch with what it takes to break into the market nowadays–my experiences were all in the mid-1980s, a world long gone. And I was never really plugged in to the short fiction world, which has changed even more than the novel market.

I am wary of this current mania for making writers blog, post, and generally make noise all over the internet in an effort to get buzz for their books, sold or unsold. Ditto exhausting convention travel. It's all very well, but… it isn't writing fiction. If a person is an extrovert or hyperactive, and can do it in such a way that it doesn't drain time, energy, and attention away from producing the real, original work, yay for them. Or if they find it an intrinsic and invigorating pleasure, like a hobby they'd be doing anyway. But the received old wisdom was that one was better off spending that time producing more and better work, faster, so that readers didn't think the writer had died between one book and the next. I'm not at all sure that's really changed.

(On one of my idle-ego-sweeps last month, I ran into my first instance, when my name came up in a book discussion, of a respondent to the OP asking, "Bujold? Is she still alive?" Still thinking about that one. But that's an old-writer problem, not a new-writer problem.)

Thanks again!

Maria Zannini, OWW - Editor